Margaret Foster. “Power to the People!”: Teen Experiences at a Chicago Public Library Open Mic Series. A Master's paper for the M.S. in I.S. degree. April, 2019. 94 pages. Advisor: Dr. Sandra Hughes-Hassell

This case study looks at the experiences of young adults and librarians at a collaborative program for teens at the Chicago Public Library called OpenMike. Held at the Harold Washington Library Center and hosted by Chance the Rapper’s non-profit, SocialWorks, OpenMike is a monthly performing arts showcase event for high school students that provides a teen-only space for creative expression, networking, and community building. As a highly attended event with teens coming from all over the Chicagoland, OpenMike highlights some of the elements needed to create a successful public library program for diverse youth, including arts and digital media, mentors, peer support, and both a physical space for teens and metaphorical “safe space.” This case study adds to the growing body of literature regarding the current and future landscape of teen services in public libraries.

Headings:

Public libraries

Library services for teenagers

Young adult services librarians

Library cultural programs

Performing arts in libraries

# “POWER TO THE PEOPLE!”: TEEN EXPERIENCES AT A CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY OPEN MIC SERIES

by
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## INTRODUCTION

Born from the death of Brother Mike Hawkins, the Digital Youth Network's (DYN) first Chicago Public Library (CPL) YOUmedia Center mentor and the "spiritual father to a generation of Chicago rappers" (Galil, 2014), OpenMike is a monthly open mic event for Chicago youth hosted in the Harold Washington Library's Pritzker Auditorium by staff members who volunteer with SocialWorks, a non-profit co-founded by Chicago rapper and activist Chance the Rapper. In line with SocialWorks' mission of empowering youth "through the arts, education, and civic engagement while fostering leadership, accessibility, and positivity," the purpose of OpenMike is to "present a safe space for high school students to share, express, and network with like-minded individuals." Since its inaugural event in February of 2015, 8,561 high school students have attended 34 OpenMikes totalling 4,020 minutes of performance (SocialWorks, 2018).

This case study seeks to examine the impact of OpenMike beyond numbers, though, by exploring the short- and long-term emotional, social, cultural, and educational outcomes of the event for attendees, in their own words. While numbers provide a snapshot of the ongoing success of OpenMike, first hand accounts provide a richer, more detailed, more nuanced and more complete story of its success. Furthermore, numbers only offer an answer to the question of whether or not an event has been successful, while narratives offer numerous perspectives about *why* an event has been successful and for

*whom*. And those perspectives can contribute to the ongoing, national discussion about what teen services and programs should look like in the 21st century (Braun et al., 2014).

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## *Youth Services and Programming*

In order to measure and evaluate the success of OpenMike and identify the elements most critical to its success, it is necessary to situate this case study in the context of current trends in library youth programming and services. In 2014, the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) published a "Futures Report" on recommendations for how libraries can address the challenges of 21st century needs and re-envision their teen services in order to meet those needs (Braun et al., 2014). YALSA then began collecting case studies of how libraries are using those recommendations to re-envision their own teen services (YALSA, 2017). This OpenMike case study is in the spirit of those case studies – contributing the experiences of teens, in their own voices, to a growing body of literature that might ultimately provide a framework from which to build the future of youth services.

Expanding on its Futures Report and case study collection, in 2016 YALSA identified five priority areas "that reflect the current needs, trends, and landscape of teen services." These priority areas are:

1. The impact of libraries as teen formal and informal learning environments
2. Library staff training, skills, and knowledge
3. Equity of access
4. Cultural competence, social justice, and equity
5. Community engagement (ALA, 2017, p.2)

Some of the trends identified by youth and teen librarians that fit into these five priority areas include: digital media spaces, maker spaces and YOUmedia labs; early learning and pre-literacy skills; crafts and "artisan" skills; activism and advocacy; online communities and crowdsourcing among librarians and library students; and new library and information science education initiatives focused on community engagement and social justice (Maughan, 2014; Figueroa, 2016; Montague, 2015).

A common theme of these trends and their respective "priority areas" is an eye towards criticality – looking at how school and public libraries have traditionally served youth and understanding that reduced library budgets (especially in poor rural and urban areas), the shifting demographics of teens in the U.S., unequal access to technology, and the increasingly diverse set of skills needed to succeed in the workforce will require library and information professionals to adjust and transform the services they provide to youth (Braun et al., 2014). One approach to this paradigmatic shift that has grown in popularity among LIS professionals who work with teens is a theoretical framework and learning ecology called connected learning.

### *Connected Learning*

Connected learning is "learning that is highly social, interest-driven, and oriented towards educational, economic, or civic opportunity" (Ito, 2013). Grounded largely in sociocultural theory and critical pedagogy, connected learning seeks to address inequity in education by connecting new and diverse pathways into learning through meaningful and relevant interests and community support (Ito, et al., 2013). In addition to these learning contexts, the connected learning framework is informed by intentional design principles: everyone can participate, learning happens by doing, challenge is constant,

and everything is interconnected. Connected learning opportunities are production-centered, have a shared purpose, and are openly networked (Ito, et al., 2013).

The development of the connected learning model was informed by Ito et al.'s research on youth's new media ("digital, networked, and interactive forms" of media) use, and Henry Jenkins's theory of "participatory media culture," whereby youth engage with interactive and sociable media that require networking with other youth (Ito et al., 2010, p. 10; Jenkins et al., 2006). Ito et al. identify three different levels of engagement with new media among youth, what they call "genres of participation:" hanging out, which involves "lightweight social contact" and friendship-driven practices that may occur both online and offline; messing around, which "represents a more intense engagement with new media" and often involves experimenting through trial and error; and geeking out, which involves "an intense commitment" to new media and "high levels of specialized knowledge" ("HOMAGO") (Ito et al., 2010, p. 38; p. 54; p. 65-66).

Katie Davis and Sean Fullerton expand on Ito et al.'s work by exploring the ways in which the reality of many youth, especially non-dominant youth, falls short of the connected learning vision due to a lack of access to networked technology, particularly in school-based settings. Comparing students' experiences in school and with a series of afterschool programs, Davis and Fullerton found that the afterschool programs were more likely to display elements of connected learning; that is, they were more likely to be peer-supported, interest-powered, production-centered, have a shared purpose, and leverage networked technology. With less constraints and greater fluidity, after school settings were able to more readily create the necessary conditions for connected learning experiences (Davis and Fullerton, 2016). The success of these afterschool programs in

helping to fill a void in youth's learning ecologies suggests the potential of libraries as a viable setting for connected learning. Furthermore, Davis and Fullerton's findings regarding the challenges that even afterschool settings face in being able to provide adequate connected learning opportunities – including access to technology, language barriers, and transportation constraints – can provide a blueprint for libraries to develop services that address such obstacles (Davis and Fullerton, 2016).

### *Connected Libraries*

A key component of the connected learning model is the potential of after-school settings as connected learning environments. As Hoffman, et al. note in their overview of what they call the ConnectedLib project, "libraries are natural environments to connect learning, creativity, and knowledge production" (2016, p. 4). Librarians then, have the opportunity to play an important role in youth's learning ecology, as mentors and technical experts, as well as facilitators who can help connect youth to the resources, spaces, and communities they need to turn their interests into passions into academic and career opportunities. Indeed, librarians have the opportunity "to be the 'connector' in connected learning" (Subramaniam, 2016, p. 2).

The open nature of public libraries, in particular, can bring together diverse groups of people and encourage peer supported learning (Hoffman et al., 2016). This makes the public library an ideal setting to put connected learning's equity framework into action. "Participatory learning" is driven by "networked technologies," many of which are not available or allowed in school classrooms. With free resources, open spaces, and tech-savvy staff, public libraries can offer teens, especially "non-dominant" teens, a welcoming place to explore and "push their current boundaries of learning"

(Subramaniam, 2016, p. 2).[1] Subramaniam suggests that librarians need to go further than surveying the literature to develop adequate services, recommending instead a "participatory design" method by which librarians co-design programs and services *with* teens, establishing an "equal partnership" whereby teens can feel inspired to learn (2016).

Building on Radical Change theory, Subramniam suggests three changes that teen librarians should embrace when designing teen services and programs: (1) obtaining direct input from teens themselves, through surveys, interviews, informal conversations, and participatory design; (2) transforming the way that teens view libraries by transitioning into facilitators, rather than experts, expanding the definition of literacy to go beyond books, and developing culturally relevant programs; and (3) expanding the reach of the library beyond its physical boundaries by collaborating with community partners and encouraging teens to make connections to their broader community (2016). By embracing these changes, librarians will be better equipped to help realize connected learning in the library.

Hoffman et al.'s "Connected Libraries" report offers a detailed glimpse at some of the current library programming that is supporting all three levels of connected learning's "HOMAGO." Some of those programs include: video game design classes offered by the Houston Public Library; a volunteer program hosted by the Chattanooga Public Library that allows teens to design their own teen library programs; civic hackathons hosted by a teen-led community group at the San Francisco Public Library; a juvenile detention digital media program led by the Nashville Public Library; and a podcast and blog created by teens and sponsored by Chicago Public Library's YOUmedia lab (2016). Not only are these programs and services interest-driven, peer-supported, and academically

oriented, but many of them also take the participatory design approach posited by Subramaniam.

Mizuko Ito and Crystle Martin, both a part of the MacArthur Foundation Connected Learning Research Network, collaborated with YALSA in a series of webinars and online forums to discuss the role of libraries in promoting connected learning and confirmed that many libraries are, indeed, already employing many of the connected learning principles – peer-supported, interested-powered, academically oriented, production-centered, shared purpose, and openly networked – in their services and programs. Ito and Martin summarized the most important points that came out of these discussions that libraries should address in order to effectively support connected learning: (1) beyond simply having technology available, libraries should provide a space for youth to explore and learn how to use that technology; (2) libraries should leverage social media in order to encourage youth to extend their experience at the library, connecting what they learned back to school and the community; (3) recruit library and IT administrators to use their expertise to help youth navigate social media, rather than restrict social media; (4) librarians need to be connected learners themselves in order to deepen their own understanding of learning and diversify their skills and knowledge (Martin & Ito, 2013).

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) held a Focus on Learning Libraries in 2015 to facilitate a national conversation about the shared priorities of library professionals who are evaluating and current practices and shaping future services. Many of the topics and themes that emerged from the conference were in line with the principles and goals of connected learning, including: participatory learning, learning that

is both active and social; the early learning ecosystem, which promotes collaboration between families, communities, educators, librarians, social service providers, policy makers, funders, etc. – a "learning ecosystem" – to support early learning; and "digital inclusiveness" (IMLS, 2015, p 10). These discussions led to four recommended focus areas for advancing the idea of learning in libraries: (1) connect LIS education and professional development to 21st century librarianship; (2) pursue research that connects with library practice; (3) design participatory learning programs that demonstrate innovation and scalability; and (4) develop cross-disciplinary collaborations that advance library services nationwide (Hill, Proffitt & Streams, 2015).

Though research on learning in libraries has emerged only over the past few years, it has already produced a thorough survey of the current landscape of library services from which a set of common themes has emerged to provide a roadmap for improving those services and creating new ones. As more and more libraries develop services that embody the principles of connected learning, a set of best practices becomes possible. But the dynamic nature of the 21st-century and tools and skills required for youth to fulfill their potential as successful citizens necessitates frequent evaluation that includes the voices of those at whom such services are aimed.

### *Critical Librarianship*

Critical librarianship "asks [librarians] to look more closely at the sociopolitical world both inside and out of our libraries" (McElroy, 2017, p.6). Though libraries have called for intellectual freedom and social responsibility since the 1930s and 1960s, respectively, much of that support has been largely in theory, coming from conservative and tradition-bound institutions and administrative bodies (kara, 2007). The Progressive

Librarians Guild (PLG) formed in 1990 as an alliance of librarians who rejected the notion of neutrality and the commodification of information and was among the first groups of LIS professionals to emphasize the importance of explicitly politically contextualizing the everyday choices made on the job (Progressive Librarians Guild, n.d.). It wasn't until 2007, though, when the work of librarian and scholar Toni Samek was published that "critical librarianship" emerged to give name to library practices based in equity and social justice, library work that is "epistemological, self-reflective, and activist in nature" (Garcia, 2015).

In 2014 several librarians hosted the first of a series of Twitter discussions and "unconferences" that they named #critlib, short for critical librarianship. The goal of the #critlib series is to provide an open forum where library and information professionals can share resources, ask questions, and discuss current issues in the practice of critical librarianship (Pagowsky, 2014). The #critlib chats and subsequent interviews with librarians who have embraced critical practice have highlighted the need for spaces (physical or not) that can unite librarians and scholars with a shared interest in critical librarianship (Garcia, 2015). In addition to PLG's *Progressive Librarian* and the open-access *In the Library with the Lead Pipe,* the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* and the *Journal of Radical Librarianship* have recently emerged in response to a growing need for such spaces, as have a number of conferences (critlib, 2018).

In an effort to develop critical librarianship praxis Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy put together a 2-volume *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook.* Consisting of essays and lesson plans, the volumes "make critical pedagogy more accessible for library educators, examining both theory and practice to help the buy practitioner explore

various aspects of teaching for social justice" (American Library Association, 2016). The *Handbook* offers a useful tool for librarians in the reference and instruction setting, and Meredith Farkas goes a step further to connect critical librarianship to technology – how it's taught, how it's used, and to whom it's made accessible (Farkas, 2017). But there is a distinct gap where outreach and programming, particularly for youth, is concerned. While many library programs involve a pedagogical component, designing, implementing, and marketing programs are different processes requiring different skills, but that could nonetheless benefit from being contextualized within the political and socioeconomic environments of which they are a part. Connected learning provides a framework with equity as its goal, but critical librarianship can provide the means of getting there and should thus be included as a theoretical lens from which to evaluate and build successful youth services.

### *YOUmedia*

Digital media plays an important role in helping to create or expand access to connected learning opportunities. Online resources and communities and new media tools promote connected learning by "1) [offering] engaging formats for interactivity and self-expression, 2) [lowering] barriers to access for knowledge and information, 3) [providing] social supports for learning through social media and online affinity groups, and 4) [linking] a broader and more diverse range of culture, knowledge, and expertise to educational opportunity" (Ito, et al., 2013, p. 6). Despite its potential, however, digital media also threatens to widen the digital divide, that is, the gap in access to and use of digital media both in and outside of school that contributes to the alienation of marginalized youth from educational institutions and the workforce (Ito, et al., 2013).

In an effort to address the challenges of promoting *equitable* digital media use, the Chicago Public Library's (CPL) Harold Washington Library Center (HWLC) partnered with the Digital Youth Network (DYN) to create a youth digital media center called YOUmedia. Established around the same time that Ito et al. identified three primary forms of digital media use among teens ("hanging out, messing around, geeking out"), YOUmedia was designed intentionally, with the fundamental purpose of creating "a space that supported digital and traditional literacy development and was welcoming of, engaging to, and easily accessible by teens" (Larson, et al., 2013, p. 4). In addition to providing the spaces and tools (music and design equipment and software, cameras and laptops, etc.) teens might need to learn, create, and share, the YOUmedia lab also offers a learning model based in mentorship, in which library and DYN staff provide both material support by way of technical expertise and emotional support by way of encouraging and personal interactions with youth (Larson, et al., 2013).

With a model that allows for peer interaction and collaboration, mentorship, and interest-driven skills development, the YOUmedia lab has sparked the curiosity of educators, librarians, and academics around the world and inspired similarly designed media and "learning labs" in a number of cultural institutions (libraries, museums, community centers, etc.). Indeed, YOUmedia is an ideal example of the "connected library," providing a "living laboratory to reimagine the public library as a space that is welcoming and engaging to teens" and "leveraging the opportunities that digital media have to offer for learning" (Larson, et al., 2013, p. 5).

YOUmedia was the subject of a 3-year study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute, which

reported its findings in two reports published, respectively, one and three years after the lab opened. YOUmedia's physical space was designed to reflect the three forms of digital media use identified by Ito et al. ("HOMAGO") and the aim of the 1- and 3-year studies was to evaluate the lab's success in creating and supporting these learning opportunities, as well as to determine what obstacles, if any, the lab faced in the process (Austin et al., 2011). The CCSR study found that the "hybrid" model of YOUmedia, an unstructured public space combined with structured out-of-school programs, allowed teens to move across different forms of digital media use and encouraged a variety of engagements that the researchers categorized as socializers, readers/studiers, floaters, experimenters, and creators. The researchers found that the creators were most likely to experience connected learning. YOUmedia attracts diverse youth representing 50 different high schools and has successfully attracted traditionally underserved populations, with 66 percent of YOUmedia teens identifying as African American and 12 percent identifying as Latino/a (Sebring, 2013).

Based on interviews with teens, the CCSR researchers also identified a number of benefits to participants from YOUmedia, including physical and emotional safety and a sense of belonging. Teens also perceived that their interests were central to staff when creating activities and considered YOUmedia staff to be trusted friends and mentors. All types of teens (socializers, creators, etc.) said that YOUmedia helped them improve their digital media skills, as well as academic skills such as writing and communication with adults. Finally, YOUmedia increased teens' awareness of post-high school opportunities including college and careers in the arts (Sebring, 2013).

The CCSR report also identifies ongoing challenges for YOUmedia: equalizing the skills, responsibilities and training opportunities for CPL and DYN staff members and "melding two organizational cultures"; balancing the sometimes-conflicting goals of engaging youth and building their skills; and maintaining lab equipment and circumventing IT and administrative constraints. CCSR also offered the following considerations for libraries wanting to build learning laboratories: leveraging partnerships and building organizational capacity; choosing a convenient (accessible) location; tailoring programs to the size of the physical space; acquiring adequate funding and maintaining equipment; and utilizing toolkits and other available resources (Sebring, 2013). Sebring et al. suggest future research exploring connected learning outcomes (academic and career benefits and civic engagement) and long-term consequences of participating in programs like YOUmedia. An offshoot of YOUmedia, OpenMike might provide a source of data for analyzing both of these questions.

### *OpenMike*

Before DYN hired Mike Hawkins as its first YOUmedia mentor, the artist and activist was hosting weekly open mic events at his home on the West Side of Chicago, dubbed Lyricist Loft. Grounded in the love and art that fueled his own poetry performance group, Lyricist Loft was a space for anyone and everyone to present, perform, and consume free, non-traditional art. When Hawkins joined YOUmedia, the lab absorbed the event and Lyricist Loft became a home to a generation of local rappers, many of whom have since achieved national recognition (Galil, 2014). Perhaps the most well known of those artists, who found their voice at YOUmedia with the support of Mike Hawkins, is Chance the Rapper.

"Before Chance the Rapper performed at sold-out concert venues, he practiced his rhymes in front of an intimate crowd of roughly a dozen people at Harold Washington Library. Now the rapper is trying to return the favor, one open mic at a time" (Briscoe, 2015). Thus does the *Chicago Tribune* describe the beginnings of OpenMike, an ongoing performance series that is now in its third year and permanently hosted at Harold Washington Library. Chance recorded his first mixtape in the YOUmedia recording studio and, recognizing the crucial element of mentorship in youth skills development, launched OpenMike in the wake of his own mentor's passing (Stephens, 2015). Malcolm London, a rapper and activist from the West side of Chicago, lauded Chance for "giving back in a certain way that creates new avenues for equity and access," noting, "if it wasn't for [Harold Washington] library we may not have left our neighborhoods." Thus, for reasons both sentimental and practical, Chance and London chose to bring the series, which had previously varied in location, back to the library permanently, "bringing it back home basically" (Whalen, 2015).

Speaking about the unique format of OpenMike, London references the "public dialogue that art can create." Allowing youth to engage in creative expression – through rap, spoken word, song and dance, film, etc. – leads to an honesty that's more difficult to capture in strictly academic work. And, when youth are allowed to be themselves, London says, "it's never devoid of the larger social narrative." In other words, the format that teens choose for their OpenMike performance may lead them to develop new skills and even seek college and career opportunities, but it also encourages civic engagement in a way that other programming may not, "because art creates the culture and transforms the culture and ultimately affects policy change and social movements" (Whalen, 2015).

As a program founded by two African American men that combines the artistic and cultural appeal of performance art with the intellectual space of a library, OpenMike has elements yet to be studied within the connected learning and connected libraries frameworks and could thus offer unique insight into the interests and priorities of diverse youth and how a collaborative library program can successfully address them.

# METHODOLOGY

## *Research Questions*

The central question of this research is as follows:

*How is the OpenMike program beneficial to its participants, and are there any challenges it still needs to overcome for maximal success and impact?*

The data gathering and analysis processes will be guided by additional sub-questions:

1. Do the results – that is, the design principles and outcomes identified by participants as the most meaningful – align with the design principles and learning outcomes of the connected learning model? Is OpenMike a connected learning experience?
2. Are the arts, and specifically performance, a key component of OpenMike? If so, should the arts be incorporated more effectively in library teen services?
3. Which aspects of OpenMike identified by participants as important are unique to OpenMike? Which aspects could be used to build a teen services and programming framework for other public libraries?

## *Research Design*

The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) has identified the connected learning model as critical to the future of teen services and programming in libraries (Braun et al., 2014). As such, whether a service or program can be defined as a connected learning experience is an indicator of its success in adequately addressing

teens' needs. As an emerging conceptual framework that is continually growing and changing, connected learning theory can be advanced by grounded theory. Connected learning provides a framework against which to analyze and evaluate the learning ecology of OpenMike, especially in comparison to the existing literature on connected learning experiences in the library; however, as a case study, the data gathered for this research, and the process of gathering it, provides the structure for the story it tells. The firsthand accounts of participants' experiences with OpenMike forms a narrative that hasn't yet been told and thus, can only be theorized, at least in part, as it forms. Such is the idea of grounded theory: "theory emerges simultaneously with data collection – it isn't a separate process" (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 42).

This research is designed as a case study. A case study is a research approach "often used in exploratory studies to define phenomena worth studying further" (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 53). Interest-driven library teen programming, and specifically programming that encourages creative expression through performance art, is a relatively new phenomenon, and one that is uncommon enough to warrant studying. The high profile nature of OpenMike makes it a particularly "unique" event that "needs to be documented and analyzed" (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 54). Furthermore, the purpose of this research is to evaluate a program based on participants' experiences in order to contribute to the development of future library teen services, especially those that will reach underserved youth. As a facilitator of evaluation research, case studies "can be directly applied to the improvement of information and library practice," making it the most appropriate approach to this study (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 53)

Wildemuth proposes four questions to answer when considering the use of a case study as a research strategy:

1. Does the phenomenon of interest have to be studied in a natural setting?
2. Does the phenomenon of interest focus on contemporary events?
3. Does the research question aim to answer how and why questions?
4. Does the phenomenon of interest include a variety of factors and relationships that can be directly observed? (2009)

The appropriateness of a case study in this case is clear: OpenMike is a collaborative library program for Chicago youth that encourages creativity and leadership within a very specific setting and must be studied in that setting; OpenMike is a contemporary and ongoing program; the research questions ask why OpenMike is a valuable experience for its participants and how it came to be a successful event; and OpenMike includes a variety of factors and relationships that can be directly observed, including technology and digital media use, performance art, peer support, and mentorship.

As noted in the literature review, the application of connected learning to the library setting – "connected library" – is a growing body of literature, but not yet a complete area of knowledge and practice. Case studies in particular have contributed greatly to a better understanding of the specific ways in which libraries are addressing the 21st century needs of teens and are important for providing the foundation from which a new framework for teen services and programming can be built. OpenMike is unique: it was established by a local (and now global) celebrity who is still very much involved in each event; it has garnered national media attention and amassed a huge teen following on social media, and it's provided a space where teens who might not otherwise visit the

library can feel safe, inspired, and empowered. The uniqueness of OpenMike may greater reduce the generalizability of this study, but it could also offer new data and intriguing insights about *intentional* and *impactful* 21st century library services.

In order to triangulate the findings – a technique from "more structured approaches to qualitative data collection and analysis" with which Eisenhardt (1989) proposes synthesizing grounded theory in the case study approach (Darke, Shanks & Broadbent, 1998, p.275) – this case study uses a mixed method approach to data collection: a focus group with youth who have either participated in or attended OpenMike (or both), questionnaires from two YOUmedia librarians with direct involvement and/or knowledge of OpenMike, observation notes, and SocialWorks, YOUmedia and OpenMike social media posts.

As LIS professor Mega Subramaniam notes, "it is crucial that teen services librarians obtain teens' voices (especially non-dominant teens)," in order to "conceptualize, design, implement, and evaluate connected learning programs and services for teens" (2016, p. 1). Thus, a focus group highlights teen voices in order to identify the most impactful, the most promising, and the most lacking aspects of OpenMike that can be used to inform other services. Questionnaire responses from staff members allows for a comparison between how teens view the impact of OpenMike and how adults perceive of its impact; whether or not those perspectives align could inform potential areas for modification or redesign of the event and for improvements in communication and relationship-forming between teens and staff members.

Focus groups are inexpensive, an efficient use of time, and importantly, conducive to candid discussions and thus, an appropriate choice for data collection from

teens who may be more resistant to or uncomfortable with a more formal or rigid methodology. Moreover, focus groups have proven to be useful in evaluating library services and programs and "identifying areas of user satisfaction and dissatisfaction," which is, essentially, the goal of this research study – to evaluate OpenMike through the participants' own words (Widdows et al., 1991, p. 353). While such data may not be generalizable to the larger population, it may reveal interests, needs, and concerns common to a specific type of teen library user or user group that exists, or should exist, in other libraries. Combined with data from librarians, the focus group provides further information by establishing a basis for comparing the teens' experiences to the adults' experiences with OpenMike – a valuable technique for evaluating a program from all angles (Widdows et al., 1991).

Because OpenMike is held at the Harold Washington Library and many of the youth who participate in and attend the event use the YOUmedia lab, the researcher asked three CPL teen librarians, one of whom is the OpenMike liaison, to assist with recruitment of focus group subjects. Many of the YOUmedia staff work closely with youth on a regular basis and have formed informal mentoring relationships with them; thus, in addition to physical proximity to the teens who come to OpenMike, the teen librarians have trust and a closeness to the teens that would allow for more involved conversations about this case study and their potential willingness to participate. A snowball technique was used to recruit questionnaire subjects: after establishing initial contact with one teen librarian at YOUmedia who agreed to help recruit teens for the focus group, that librarian looped in four other CPL librarians for assistance (Sadler et al., 2010). Two librarians expressed interest in speaking with the researcher. The researcher

originally intended to conduct in-person interviews with CPL librarians, but one librarian became ill on the day on which the interview was scheduled and the other then had to fill in for the first librarian's shift. Thus, instead of in-person interviews, the two YOUmedia librarians agreed to fill out a detailed questionnaire containing the same questions as the in-person interview guide.

Recruitment of teens involved supplying the YOUmedia librarians with sample focus group questions and permission forms to use as talking points with the teens. YOUmedia librarians were also given a copy of a recruitment flyer to hand out to students who came to the YOUmedia lab and to post in various locations in HWLC. The first stage of in-person recruitment occurred directly before the December OpenMike, while students were standing in line, and when the first 100 teens were granted special entry to the YOUmedia lab. The researcher, with the help of two staff members, talked to students in line and in YOUmedia and asked if they were interested in sharing their experiences with OpenMike. The researcher and staff members also handed out flyers to students in line and students who signed in when they came to YOUmedia. In order to reach the researcher's goal of ten participants, the researcher took to the stage at the end of OpenMike to remind students of the focus group. Interested students were asked to meet the researcher at a space in the YOUmedia lab after the event, where they would receive a $20 gift card as compensation. Five students arrived at the focus group location, with a sixth student who joined about halfway through. All six students read and signed a consent form and spoke with the researcher for 35 minutes. In order to reduce logistical barriers to the study, only students that were 18 years of age were recruited, which was likely the reason for six, rather than ten, participants.

The researcher received research grant funds to buy gift cards as compensation for the young adult focus group participants. The researcher also received an additional research grant to cover dinner and transportation expenses, as holding the focus group after OpenMike required participants to stay through dinner and late enough into the night that a paid-for Uber fare would better ensure participant safety.

### *Analysis*

Bertrand et al. suggest three techniques for analyzing focus group data: verbatim transcription from the recording, expanding on notes taken by the non-participating researcher using the recording, and working with the observing researcher's notes only (1992). Due to the requirement that all master's papers be completed individually, as well as the logistical barriers of including additional researchers in the study's IRB application, the researcher conducted the focus group on her own; thus, while she could only take scant notes for particularly important revelations, her focus was on facilitating the discussion and so analysis was necessarily approached with the first technique, verbatim transcription of the audio recording. As Bertrand et al. note, the primary advantage of this method is its completeness and reliability. The disadvantage is the time required to transcribe, but the researcher only conducted a single focus group lasting 35 minutes (Bertrand et al., 1992). A copious amount of colloquialisms and slang throughout the focus group increased transcription time, but not enough to cause the process to be unmanageable. Furthermore, because the librarian interviews actually became questionnaire responses, even less transcription was required than originally intended.

Due to the time investment required to overcome the learning curve of computer software, the researcher coded the focus group data by hand. Bertrand et al. suggest

making an inventory of main points discussed during the focus group (1992). By tallying main points the researcher can both determine the proportion of the conversation dedicated to different topics and begin to identify themes that emerge from the conversation. With a broad idea of topics discussed, the researcher then read through the transcript several times, taking an inductive approach to coding and ultimately creating separate documents for each code (theme) containing the relevant portions of the transcript from which interpretations were drawn (Campbell et al., 2013).

***Knowledge Gap***

CCRS's first report on YOUmedia concluded, "through participation, production, and performance, YOUmedia presents opportunities for youth to engage in a cycle of learning. Future work will study the links between these forms of engagement and youth development" (Austin et al., 2011, p. 42). This research on OpenMike builds on Austin et al.'s research on YOUmedia by studying just that: the links, as identified by youth themselves, between engagement through open mic events and development – be it personal, academic, cultural, etc. While additional research is needed to study the long-term impact of OpenMike on its participants' development, this study aims to provide a solid starting point, as well as a model for studying additional specific service and programming outputs of the YOUmedia lab.

This case study also seeks to help fill a gap in important research by adding to a growing body of literature regarding the application of connected learning to the library setting - *how* do libraries connect learning, creativity, and knowledge production? And what training, skills, and knowledge do they need to do so? Though current examples of "connected library" programs range from video game design to coding and podcasting,

few, if any, focus on the arts, further affirming the perception that libraries are relegating their roles as cultural centers in favor of becoming technology hubs (Smallwood, 2014). While the arts have traditionally served to enhance both the cultural appeal of libraries and libraries' connections to their broader communities, technology has served to enhance the educational appeal of libraries and thus, in the eyes of a profit-driven society's taxpayers, their value. But culture and education are not mutually exclusive; this study of OpenMike, then, seeks to bridge that gap and highlight the potential of the arts to support connected learning opportunities, especially for diverse youth.

### *Limitations*

Because OpenMike is only held once a month and it is impossible to determine which teens regularly attend the event, attending one OpenMike to recruit focus group participants and handout consent forms for parents to sign, and then attending the next OpenMike to collect consent forms and hold the focus group seemed risky, given that the teens recruited at the first OpenMike could decide not to attend the next one or, being teens, simply forget to come back to participate in the focus group. Thus, order to avoid the logistics of getting parental consent forms from teens, the researcher limited focus group participation to young adults who were 18 years of age so that they could sign their own consent forms in person, at the focus group. Due to this age restriction, however, and the fact that few high school seniors have turned 18 by December of their school year, recruitment for the focus group was difficult and extremely limiting. The majority of OpenMike attendees are not 18. Thus, while the researcher hoped to recruit ten young adults, she was only able to recruit six, one of whom had to leave midway through the

interview. The six participants provided rich data, but obviously, a greater number of participants would have yielded a greater amount, and perhaps variety, of data.

Self-selection is another limitation of this case study; students who attended the December 10, 2018 OpenMike but did not enjoy it would not have been likely to have agreed to sit down for an interview afterwards to talk about their experience. Therefore, the students who did participate in the focus group likely did so because of how much they love OpenMike, and subsequent data could not account for any students with negative, or even neutral, opinions of OpenMike.

Because SocialWorks plays such a large role in OpenMike, the researcher originally intended to get the perspective of SocialWorks staff and volunteers. Through a YOUmedia librarian who serves as the liaison for SocialWorks, a questionnaire was forwarded to SocialWorks with a request to complete and send back the questionnaire to the researcher. The liaison warned the researcher that SocialWorks has an extremely small full-time staff (approximately two people) who are stretched thin and thus, rely heavily on volunteers. For this reason, the researcher expected that the SocialWorks staff members would not necessarily have time or remember to complete the questionnaire, and this turned out to be the case. In addition, SocialWorks recruits different volunteers for every event and while some people volunteer regularly, the researcher could not determine whether SocialWorks collects data about who volunteers and when, and so she was not able to reach out to volunteers to participate in the questionnaire. Consequently, this case study does not contain data from SocialWorks about their perspective on OpenMike, its success with students, the partnership with YOUmedia, and the like. The

researcher attempted to fill in this gap by including questions about SocialWorks in the librarian questionnaire.

Finally, the celebrity aspect of OpenMike limits the generalizability of this case study, as Chance is responsible for the partnership between SocialWorks and YOUmedia and, though the necessity of his presence for high attendance has diminished, his presence at the inception of the program was likely a huge draw for students and created a form of automatic marketing and outreach unavailable to most libraries. Nonetheless, the inspiration for and the core values on which OpenMike is based and practiced are not inherently unique to OpenMike or dependent on a celebrity like Chance the Rapper.

# FINDINGS

Four primary themes emerged from analysis of the focus group and questionnaire data, each of which will be explored in detail in this section. Of some significance is the amount of overlap in the perceptions of OpenMike between the young adults who participated in the focus group and the two librarians who completed the questionnaire; while the adults had greater knowledge of the amount of work and logistics required to put on OpenMike every month (whereas the teens seemed blissfully unaware of such preparation), both groups expressed deep appreciation for and enthusiasm about the program and the way that it not only benefits the students who attend, but also the library, and even the city of Chicago, as a whole. The first theme to emerge from the data was the value of art and its potential to change lives.

## *Art Plays a Critical Role in the Lives of Teens*

The centrality of art in OpenMike is evident in its mission: "teach showmanship, connect young artists, and inspire creativity within the next wave of Chicago youth" (SocialWorks, 2018). While previous research on the HWLC's YOUmedia lab and this paper itself do seek to explore additional (social, academic, economic, etc.) intentions and outcomes of these creative spaces, observation of the December 2018 OpenMike and a subsequent focus group with six young adults who attended made it clear that above all else, art – "showmanship," craftsmanship, creative expression, artistic experimentation, etc. – is paramount. The emphasis that both the young adults, as well as two YOUmedia

librarians, placed on art revealed itself as three recurring themes throughout the focus group and questionnaires: the necessity of having a creative outlet as a means for teen self expression, the ability for art to expand teens' horizons, and art as a skill that can be honed for personal satisfaction, as well as for career prospects.

Teens are a unique population: no longer children, but not quite adults, an awareness of their own nebulous place in society is apparent in their awkwardness and concomitant self-assuredness, their playful rebelliousness, and their seemingly endless supply of restless energy. This is all on display inside the YOUmedia lab, as 100 teens excitedly wait for OpenMike to commence. To an outsider it might look like little more than a poorly supervised afterschool free-for-all, but the YOUmedia staff would likely argue that what it really is, is a sort of beautiful chaos: teens are screaming, running, eating – all of the things antithetical to most library settings – but they are also creating; a staff member is showing a young woman how to use a sewing machine, a young man is fiddling with a giant model train, another young woman is listening attentively to a staff member who is explaining how to paint on a computer, and a group of young men are taking turns playing on a drum set.

Though Chance the Rapper generated the original hype for OpenMike, in its third year of monthly performances, teens know not to expect the presence of a celebrity at every event. And yet, they show up anyway. Indeed, YOUmedia librarian Daniel Thorson expected widespread disappointment the first time OpenMike proceeded "sans Chance," but teens left the auditorium with the same adrenaline rush as always. Recognizing that there might be something else drawing teens in every month, the YOUmedia staff bet on a common thread of creative interest running through the teens continuing to show up for

OpenMike and decided to make the time teens spent waiting in line for the event more productive by allowing the first 100 students to hangout in the YOUmedia lab – hence, the beautiful chaos.

The teens that participated in the focus group confirmed their common interest in the arts and why the chance to be creative is so important, expressing a consensus that other libraries and even schools should have more creative spaces. One student emphasized the showcasing aspect of OpenMike: "Whether it's art, dance, music, poetry, cinematography, all that good stuff…it's really nice for everybody to be able to have a safe space where they can, you know, express themselves and not be judged for it." Another student noted, "it's important for people to have that creative outlet cause you don't get it in school," suggesting that more arts programs should be established on the south and west sides of Chicago. Thorson agrees that, "arts should be a focus in library spaces" because "teen development relies heavily on…establishing a self-identity and voice and taking risks" and "arts which allow for performance and showcasing provide all of these opportunities."

In addition to providing an avenue for identity forming and self-expression, the arts provide teens a window into the world outside their homes and their classrooms. One student who participated in the focus group described herself as "not really like an artistic kinda person," and though she's been attending OpenMike throughout high school, she has never performed – she just enjoys watching her peers and seeing all of the "different types of expressing yourself." She also feels more connected to her peers and new artist communities after attending OpenMike. As part of Generation Z, the students who attend OpenMike are heavily plugged into social media, so while the event itself can serve as a

brief introduction to young artists, these artists can then cultivate a larger following by promoting themselves online.

Almost every performer at the December 2018 OpenMike ended their performance with a social media plug: their Twitter and Instagram handles or their SoundCloud channel. In other words, what OpenMike offers is not only a marketing opportunity for artists, but also a discovery opportunity for audience members. Knowing that Chance the Rapper launched his career through YOUmedia and SoundCloud, students are excited at the prospect that someone they see on stage at OpenMike might become the next big name, and they will be the lucky few hundred who got to see them first. In fact, one of the most prominent features of the SocialWorks Instagram page is a monthly #OpenMikeSpotlight wherein SocialWorks posts a picture of and a quote from an OpenMike performer (https://www.instagram.com/socialworks_chi/?hl-en). This serves as both a promotion for the event, as well as a signal to those following SocialWorks that if their peers are succeeding, they can succeed too, and the SocialWorks and OpenMike community is there to help. Though the student who described herself as not artistic may not perform, she is still a critical part of the community because artists need support and she likes to “see them grow” by following their process on social media.

Even more than expanding artistic and social horizons, for students who may feel restricted in their daily life, especially those for whom the threat of violence means very little freedom to go anywhere outside of their home or school, OpenMike offers a means of escape: students can meet people and learn about a world that is completely new to them. As one student described his experience at OpenMike, “it opens you up, let’s you

feel new feelings and just, experiences." Because of Chicago's distinct, and often isolated, neighborhoods, for a city so large, it can often feel quite small. One student loves that at OpenMike, he can meet artists from all over the city and even surrounding suburbs: "Yeah, that's pretty dope."

Finally, OpenMike illustrates the potential for art to serve not only as a hobby, but also as a tangible skill that can lead to academic and professional success. Students who participate in and attend OpenMike see that art can lead directly to a product or a brand that can be bought and sold (music, painting, poetry), or it can help develop the knowledge and skills that are critical to academic and professional success, such as confidence, motivation, and perseverance.

One student in the focus group said that OpenMike opens doors; for her, it affirmed her interest in the performing arts and encouraged her to develop her talent in acting, which has led to parts on Lena Waithe's Showtime television show *The Chi,* upcoming CBS show *The Red Line*, and upcoming Fox show *Proven Innocent*. She notes that OpenMike gives young people the permission to invest in their creative passions, so that "if you wanna get away, you know to go to your talent and not somethin else that won't help." Another student auditioned for a Youtube series, 2 Brothers: A Chicago Lifestyle and blew the creators away. She echoed the sentiment of opening doors, crediting OpenMike for encouraging her to branch out, after previously sticking to things like house management, prop direction and lighting:

> [Before that] I would've never done it. I'd be like, naww I can't do that, I mean, they'd be like, uh you're doin it wrong, sweetie, you have to go. So I was just like, yeah I can do this. And yeah, seein other people get up on stage in front of a whole bunch of people that they don't know? Doin stuff, which makes me feel better about getting [in front of] a camera that's gonna be edited and for

> everybody else to see. So, yeah it's like, it opens you up to new feelings and stuff, cause if you can do it here, you can do it anywhere.

Beyond real life opportunities, the students expressed another common sentiment - that OpenMike opens doors *mentally*, in the sense that they all had an existing interest in some form of art, but needed a push to go from casual curiosity to more involved experimentation to serious honing of a craft.

Several students said that seeing other artists showcase their work motivated them to do the same. One student said that attending OpenMike, "it's pushin me like, to be more creative, to expand in my art, to grow in my craft and to like, push to other levels. Like cause, I feel like without that my progression probably wouldn't have gotten as far as it did." By providing mentors, peer support and feedback, and a stage to be seen and heard, OpenMike creates a system of accountability and incentive for youth to improve themselves through art. Furthermore, when teens see their peers succeeding, they realize that their dreams may not be impossible, that art is not a waste of time: "It's good to see other people that have the passion for what we have want to expand and do more with it and not just hone it as a hobby, but do it professionally."

Matt Jensen is a youth services librarian at YOUmedia who has been encouraging teens to develop and nurture their creative talents since Chance the Rapper was a Chicago Public School student recording music at YOUmedia's recording studio. As he puts it,

> …Everyone everywhere should make more room for the arts…Art encourages reflection, practice, and iteration. All of those things are so important to all kinds of disciplines! Not to mention that art in the form of music, painting, sculpture, etc. is a massive cultural export and creates a better understood and cohesive society around the world! *Art is so important*.

In other words, art is all encompassing: it is an invaluable vehicle for self-expression (especially for teens, who may feel unable to express themselves in the rigid environment

of school or an unstable home life), it broadens teens' social lives and cultural knowledge, and it allows them to think beyond traditional academic success and professional goals.

### *Teens Value a Physical Space Created Just for Them*

In talking to some of the young adults who attended the December 2018 OpenMike, many of whom were also among the first 100 students given an hour to explore YOUmedia, it became clear that the OpenMike, an event that is a collaboration with YOUmedia but not run by YOUmedia, has nonetheless contributed to an increase in interest among youth in everything that YOUmedia has to offer: musical equipment and other technology, virtual reality and other gaming systems, sewing machines and other crafting tools, and on and on – essentially anything that might spark some creative curiosity in a young adult. In addition to physical materials, the interviewed students also seemed to place a high value on the physical space of the YOUmedia lab and its layout, as well as on the YOUmedia librarians and staff.

YOUmedia opens at noon or 1pm every day (Chicago Public Library, 2019) and while those opening hours - when many students are still in school - may be quieter, conversations with some of the staff suggest that YOUmedia is always occupied by young patrons. There is, of course, a unique energy in the space on OpenMike nights in particular, but the prevailing air of freedom – to explore, to experiment, to just mess around – is constant. For teens, being afforded such a high level of independence can be rare. For the majority of teens who show up to YOUmedia, that level of independence, as well as support and encouragement from adults and a government institution, can be even more rare: Daniel Thorson estimates that 45% of YOUmedia patrons are Black and about

30% are Hispanic – populations that are largely ignored, if not actively oppressed, by the City of Chicago (Henricks et al., 2017).

Considering Chance recorded his very first mixtape at YOUmedia (Stephens, 2015), it's no surprise that the recording studio was crowded by teens trying to push their way in for an opportunity to record on the night of the December 2018 OpenMike. One of the students who participated in the focus group said that he continued to come back to YOUmedia after attending OpenMike for the first time so that he could use the studio. Likewise, Jensen noted that good sound equipment and, in the case of OpenMike, a high level DJ, is a "big draw" for teens, as are the musical instruments. Thorson says YOUmedia recently invested in more instruments, which has resulted in the space being "constantly brimming with jam sessions, band rehearsals and impromptu open mics."

As a budding young rapper, access to such equipment is obviously valuable to the student who talked about returning to YOUmedia for the studio, but he also explained that he likes getting to know the other students who stop by to mix tapes or participate in YOUmedia's own, smaller open mic sessions. Finally, he emphasized the general feel of YOUmedia; whether biding time before getting into the studio by looking at Rick and Morty comics or relaxing after school by playing video games, he "can always come out here and be here and have like, a comfortable space…whatever it is, I always feel comfortable in here."

The other students who were interviewed expressed a similar appreciation for the "chill" atmosphere of YOUmedia, lamenting that more libraries don't have similar spaces or events like OpenMike, where teens are free to roam around and meet people and not have to worry about things like their noise level. Thus, beyond technology and state-of-

the-art equipment, teens seem to place a high value on the physical layout of a space and their position in it – no quiet areas or sterilized reading rooms, no uncomfortably rigid chairs that aren't allowed to be moved, no age restrictions on what can be checked out: YOUmedia is not just a place for teens, it's a space that has been intentionally designed with the behaviors and desires and priorities of teens in mind.

Part of that intentional design includes who is hired to work at YOUmedia. In speaking to and observing the staff members who were working on the night of OpenMike, it is clear that they possess two important qualities: (1) they have expertise in one, if not several, areas of digital media, art, and STEM and (2) they are incredibly good at interacting with teens: they are patient, enthusiastic, and relatable and rather than resorting to an authoritarian manner of supervision, they seem to use their social, cultural and technical knowledge to gain teens' respect and to manage the space. Many adults, especially those who work in a field known (however accurately or inaccurately) for shushing and strict adhesion to rules, fear disorder and anarchy when they see teens, but the YOUmedia staff just see young people with interests and passions, and perhaps, an abundance of energy, but energy that can be directed towards productive creative expression.

Watching the way that YOUmedia librarians interact with their patrons it is clear that they see an opportunity to provide mentorship and they act on it: Thorson has helped develop YOUmedia's music and writing programming. He has also helped to create more showcasing opportunities for teens because he has learned from the success of OpenMike that, "the most successful showcase opportunities are those that create a new audience for teens, mainly of peers. The larger the audience, the more social capital and self-esteem is

built." Clearly, YOUmedia librarians are paying attention; they're constantly learning more about their young patrons – who they are and what interests them – so that they can expand the reach of their services. That level of support does not go unnoticed by the teens. One student said that more libraries need a space for teens where they feel comfortable discovering and practicing their talent. While the equipment and physical space contribute to such opportunities, that crucial component of comfort isn't possible without the right people:

> YOUmedia is a place where you can come and everybody in here cares about you like, a lot of other libraries are like, they're there to do their job; they're not there to care about anybody that's comin there. So, I feel like all they [other libraries] need really, is a space where teens can go practice and also a team that cares about us.

***Teens Benefit from Safe and Alternative Spaces***

Data from the focus group suggests that teens not only benefit from the physical and creative spaces that YOUmedia and OpenMike provide for socializing, designing, and learning, but they also benefit from what YOUmedia and OpenMike *represent*: a supplement (and sometimes an alternative) to school, an escape from violence, and a safe outlet for a range of emotions.

When asked about how they learned of YOUmedia and/or OpenMike, most of the students replied that word-of-mouth was important, but one student had an unexpected response: he was suspended from school one day and in order to prevent his father from finding out, he began leaving his house every morning at 9 a.m. as if he were going to school, but would instead take the train to the HWLC. One day, he walked by YOUmedia and was surprised to see a line of teens wrapped around the corner, waiting to get into OpenMike. Though he was not yet in high school, and thus unable to attend, the student

did start regularly going to YOUmedia and has attended several OpenMike events since entering high school.

One could argue that a library is likely one of the best places a student can turn to in lieu of school, but even for the students who have not found themselves at HWLC by way of suspension, YOUmedia and OpenMike offer an important supplement when school is not providing everything that a teen may need in order to thrive, or even survive. This seems to be especially true in regards to the arts. One student said he wishes that more kids had access to a space like YOUmedia or OpenMike, that "it's important for people to have that creative outlet cause you don't get it in school." He continued, "We barely have any arts programs as it is and if we have arts programs, they aren't funded [well]." It is interesting to note that these high school students not only see creative outlets as necessary, but also as being in the scope of what schools should provide to students.

YOUmedia and OpenMike, not simply as available spaces but as *creative* spaces, also offer teens a refuge from violence. Significantly, the students implied that it's not enough for young people to have the option to be somewhere other than outside, doing something other than engaging in violence; the option must be appealing, in that it should be fulfilling the same purpose as the alternative. In other words, violence is not an end goal; more often than not, it's the manifestation of deeper, internal struggles bubbling to the surface. The students explained that people, and young people in particular, need to be able to express themselves, and that being able to express anger, sadness, frustration, desperation, boredom, confusion, etc. through creativity is both safer and far more productive than expressing those things through violence.

Speaking to the performance aspect, one student said, “OpenMike just gave everybody a chance to like, be discovered and get a chance to actually do somethin productive with their lives instead of bein outside on the streets or somethin.” Another student suggested that kids from more violent areas actually need spaces like OpenMike more than other kids, not just because of the violence itself, but because of the impact that the violence has had on their lives: “the South Side need it more cause they have like, more creativity and it kinda would bring the violence down a little more because they’ll be able to express themselves more with people that actually get them and not people that don’t listen.” This last part suggests that in addition to the creative and technical aspects, OpenMike is a unique refuge because of *who* participates (non-dominant teens) and what *experiences* (violence, poverty, a lack of adult relationships or support - things that a different type of audience and/or staff might not relate to) the content of their art conveys.

The final ingredient of YOUmedia and OpenMike’s success as safe havens for teens is the support that teens receive for expressing their emotions and being themselves. There is vulnerability in creating - a feeling that is only exacerbated by sharing personal creations - that the students seem to recognize and appreciate. Though adults who don’t actually listen to teens may assume they have few interests beyond phone screens, one student said he enjoys OpenMike so much because it “let’s you feel new feelings.” Why it’s able to do that might have something to do with the way it’s designed. The only adults allowed in the auditorium are the DJs, a handful of SocialWorks volunteers, and occasionally, some YOUmedia staff. Daniel Thorson says that’s intentional: “Teen-ownership is a key element to any teen program, but is especially critical during an event like OpenMike where teens are encouraged to share their voice. Teen participants feel

empowered to speak their mind, take risks and be themselves." One student echoed this exact sentiment:

> I really feel like it would be a really good thing if they had [OpenMike] at a lot of other schools...because...there's not a lot of places for kids to build safe communities, to express themselves and to just be creative and to be able to be kids, to show off and to be supported.

OpenMike succeeds as a safe space for teens because the teens not only feel valued there, but they feel *in control*.

### *OpenMike Creates and Builds Diverse Communities*

In an interview about the inception of OpenMike, co-founder Malcolm London talks about why, after he and Chance decided to bring the event back to HWLC permanently in late 2015, kids continued to turnout in droves despite Chance or a guest performer not being present every time: "it's about [the kids] creating their own community and them running with it" (Whalen, 2015). In agreement with London, Daniel Thorson says, "The culture of performance and audience support has created a teen community that is not largely predicated upon celebrity support."

The community is, instead, predicated upon peer support. As one student pointed out, "performing in front of your peers is like, one of the hardest things to do because it's…it opens you up to be judged more." But at OpenMike, that judgment is nowhere to be seen, at least not in any sort of negative context; rather, the OpenMike community is "uplifting," it acts as a "message of support for everybody," whether they're performing or not. One student has not yet worked up the courage to get on stage, but if she did, she says, "I would feel like it's an embracing environment because everybody's cool, it's not like, 'oh we don't like this so we're gonna boo you,' so…it's fun, it's fun."

Because OpenMike is a community, the teens involved not only feel comfortable with each other, they actually value each other's opinions. Matt Jensen says that in addition to the "positive atmosphere" of OpenMike, teens appreciate "the chance to practice and receive positive feedback from their peers." That feedback seems to be particularly significant if it's coming from a fellow artist - someone who knows the craft and can provide an informed assessment.

Peer support and feedback is a key reason why a community of artists has been able to develop within the broader OpenMike community. Several of the students who participated in the OpenMike group said that they were able to take themselves seriously as artists because of the support they saw *other* performers receiving from the audience and the support they then *themselves* received once they took to the stage. One student described his own experience:

> Performing [at OpenMike] made me more confident in my art like, when I was, um when I performed and Chance like, I got the open mic spotlight, right? That was like, really invigorating for me because it's like, yo, they see what I'm doin and it's like, you know, they like it. It's like havin that push that "yo, you actually got somethin, you can do this." It's like, oh yeah I can, I can…I can do this! Like let's do it!

Another student had a similar experience wherein the positive response he got from his peers allowed him to recite poems, rap, and share his artwork. Daniel Thorson's perception of the effect of peer support on confidence building is similar. He says, "There is a real sense that teens in the audience will rally around each performer, particularly those who may first appear to be nervous/reluctant. This is evident through audience sing-alongs, clap-alongs, shouts of 'you can do it', etc."

Multiple students cited seeing other young artists showcase their work as a source of motivation for them to do the same and suggests that discovering a shared passion of

art, as well as a willingness to persevere, has helped students engage more seriously in the community of artists that exists both within and outside of OpenMike (in that OpenMike played a role in its creation, but it has also spilled over into other spaces like YOUmedia where artists can continue to practice their talents in the interim period between showcasing events). As an artist, one student said that seeing "others work on they craft and gettin out there...doin something" and hearing "other people's music...when their music is raw," motivates him "to do better." Another student agreed: "I love OpenMike because every time I go over there it be like, thrilling to me to like, see other artists doin what they do, and also, bein an artist, it motivates me to try and do better."

Another source of inspiration, beyond seeing artists simply put themselves out there, is seeing artists who put themselves out their and actually succeed by getting attention from other artists and important players in the Chicago arts scene. As Daniel Thorson notes, "teen performers receive social capital, attention from actual influences in the art/performance community and the opportunity to elevate their voice." And students are certainly aware of such social capital. One young woman described how she originally began attending OpenMike because she wanted to "meet new people with this same level of love for, for arts and stuff like that," but quickly realized that OpenMike offered more than just new friends, it offered contacts: at the December 2018 OpenMike, a young performer called Z the Weirdo, "she was singin and when she came back to see like, 'hey, I work at a studio if you wanna ever make a song, if you wanna make a song just here, here's my contact, you can contact me.'" She thus considers OpenMike a "networking thing amongst the kids, a…'scratch my back, I scratch yours' thing."

Social capital exists among the teens, but it also seems to be an important element in the relationships between the teens and the adults involved in OpenMike, YOUmedia and SocialWorks. Mentorship has been a key element of YOUmedia since its creation (Sebring, 2013) and with YOUmedia mentor Mike Hawkins as the inspiration for establishing OpenMike as a permanent cultural program, it's no surprise that a community has developed within OpenMike that consists of caring relationships between teens and adult mentors based in mutual respect and a passion for a specific skill, interest, hobby, etc.

Though OpenMike is, of course, a teen-centered, teen-owned series, the teens are fully aware of the personal (and sometimes professional) benefits of connecting with adults who can serve as mentors. What's interesting, and perhaps surprising, about the way the focus group participants described the importance of having mentors is that the aspect of the relationship between young artist and mentor they emphasized the most was not the technical knowledge being passed on, but the emotional support and encouragement:

> It's like that uh, that push, that 'lil, that you know, mentorship that's like, 'yo, *do* that.' And to have someone tell you like, 'go out and do what you love' and to tell you that, 'yo, your art is inspiring,' it's like, yes, I wanna continue doin this.

Especially for teens who are exploring nascent passions and new types of art, having someone within the artistic community, someone who they see as having "made it," can provide the confidence that's necessary to continue learning and growing in their craft. One young woman expressed as much:

> Even in spaces where there aren't celebrities, someone givin you that push is great. Especially like, anyone you look up to is like, that's amazing when someone you look up to it's like, "oh man, you're amazing." It's like, that just gives you a whole different light on what this art thing is. And um, even in all

> mediums like, coming up in like, YCA [Young Chicago Authors], cause like, I worked there before and working with them intensely over the summer, like hearin my mentors comment on my poetry like, "yo this is perfect, don't change a thing," like, "oh man, this writing is like, y'all are so amazing," it's like, wow what?! Like public people, people who have written books – books on books, people who've traveled across the county and done this professionally, tellin you that you have it...like, people are actually hearing me and they're appreciating that. So yeah, I feel like no matter who it is, if they give you that push, I feel like that's essential in an artist's life, like they need someone to support them like that.

She also pointed out what the YOUmedia staff seem to already know, based on the way they interact with every young person who comes into the space, regardless of their motivation to create something - that support and care from an adult is essential for any teen: "Everyone needs that person, cause when you're striving for something and you have dreams and goals and you wanna reach that, having that one person behind you makes all the difference."

One surprising impact that the OpenMike community has had on teens is the way it's changed their perception of Chicago and vise versa, though this seems to have been one of Chance's intentions when he created the series. Matt Jensen noted that while Chicago is a great city, it's not perfect - "it needs a lot of help" and "Chance feels this deeply." And he's right; OpenMike is just one of many programs that Chance, through his non-profit, SocialWorks, has established in the name of "fostering leadership, accessibility, and positivity within Chicago" (SocialWorks, 2019).

The OpenMike community is a positive force for change in Chicago, but the relationship seems to be at least partially mutually beneficial, as the city itself plays a pivotal role in the continued existence of that community, according to Daniel Thorson; he posits that it's *because* so many populations in Chicago are "(rightfully) distrustful of city organizations" that OpenMike has become an invaluable refuge:

> Chicago's youth are perceived negatively on a global scale. Likewise, many teen participants come from neighborhoods that only receive negative attention. Chance, SocialWorks and [OpenMike] rewrite this narrative, creating a positive spin for Chicago's youth of color, while simultaneously addressing and confronting the institutions that foster the poverty violence and injustice affecting the lives of so many teens.

Indeed, with its home at the Chicago Public Library - a city institution - along with the "well-established trust" that it has created among teens, OpenMike has helped "restore trust in civic organizations that exist to do good for the underserved."

"OpenMike got me more open to performing and like, encouraging other people. Cause at first it was just me, me, me and now it's like I wanna encourage everybody to do it." This altruism, the desire to have others experience OpenMike, was a very common sentiment throughout the focus group. Over and over again, the participants revealed the power of the OpenMike community and what it's given them: confidence, friends and mentors, artistic and technical skills and talents, new social media accounts to follow and SoundCloud tracks to listen to. But they are not selfish; they are thankful to be a part of this special community, but extremely eager to help grow the community. As on student put it, OpenMike, "it kinda influenced me; like now, I after comin to a couple of OpenMikes I know I want to be able to give people a chance to do exactly what Chance gave people the chance to do. Like I wanna give them a space where they can express themselves and just be positive, uplift each other."

In fact, the single critique the students had of OpenMike (which they otherwise called "perfect") was that they wish it "were accessible to other kids around the city." While HWLC is likely the *most* convenient location to hold OpenMike in such a sprawling city, it is not convenient for everyone and as the teens pointed out, "some kids aren't as mobile as some of us teens are and they can't hop on trains to go far out their

way to go be creative. That's just not a luxury some kids have." One student also explained that HWLC, the CPL system's central library and a building that is grand in its architecture and mighty in its history and namesake, is intimidating to many students. It's quite possible, though, if not likely, that because these students attend OpenMike and are thus most familiar with HWLC's YOUmedia, they are not aware that CPL has actually now established 18 YOUmedia sites throughout the city, some of which are exclusively for middle school students (Chicago Public Library, 2019). Nonetheless, the students' emphasis on expansion suggests that the family-like nature of the OpenMike community has successfully influenced teens to be unselfish in their experiences and their dreams.

Of course, altruism is not unique to Chicago, but it does seem to flourish in places where hardship runs deep and triumph over long-term oppression is a goal never far from one's sight line. Indeed, one student explained that a huge part of why students show up for OpenMike is because of how Chance has shown up for them. Though Chicago has produced more than a few celebrities, in her eyes, Chance is "the only one to really do somethin" because "1) he loves the kids and 2) he loves Chicago; he wants to see everybody from this city do better, and be bigger than themselves and others, in a good way."

# DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged from the findings - that art plays a critical role in the lives of teens, that teens value a physical space designed for them and benefit from safe and alternative spaces, and that OpenMike creates and builds diverse communities - all speak to the success of OpenMike and the myriad ways in which it has benefited the teens who have attended and/or participated. Based on the findings, this section further discusses how and why OpenMike has been a success and what its success could mean for the broader landscape of teen services.

## ***How is the OpenMike program beneficial to its participants, and are there any challenges it still needs to overcome for maximal success and impact?***

As discussed at length in the findings, OpenMike has provided Chicago high school students with many benefits, both tangible and intangible: new friends, mentors, and hobbies; digital media and various artistic skills; a source of peer feedback; an entry point into the Chicago artist scene; a safe space; confidence and motivation; an emotional outlet; and permission to dream. Daniel Thorson and Matt Jensen define success by whether a program has met its original goal, which for OpenMike, was to "help people feel empowered to pursue personal education and betterment, as well as be a part of a community in Chicago." Jensen also says a program is successful "if people show up and are engaged." On both counts then, OpenMike has been successful: teens reiterated during the focus group that OpenMike has empowered them to better themselves through

their crafts and created for them a “special community” that has connected them to artists, mentors, and the idea of a better Chicago.

Both quantitative metrics, such as attendance, as well as the qualitative data that came from the focus group participants and YOUmedia librarians, suggest that OpenMike has achieved maximal success and impact: Jensen says OpenMike is “likely one of the best attended events in the library...and is full almost every month that it happens.” Thorson concurs, noting that the event “consistently draws a minimum of 350 teens from all over Chicago and surrounding suburbs,” exceeding “YOUmedia special events fairly significantly” and drawing “more participants than most all-ages, library-wide events at Harold Washington.” Furthermore, OpenMike reflects the diverse demographics of the teens served by YOUmedia and serves as a “destination event” for teens, some of whom “have traveled from as far as Oswego and Joliet (about 50 miles from Chicago each).”

OpenMike has also had an important impact on YOUmedia, where there has been an increase both in YOUmedia patrons who then attend OpenMike and OpenMike attendees who then start visiting YOUmedia. Thorson has noticed a “definite correlation between...the number of YOUmedia teens who attend OpenMike with the intention of performing” and an increase in the number and kinds of musical instruments available at YOUmedia. Furthermore, Jensen says that YOUmedia’s relatively new policy of letting the first 100 teens to arrive to OpenMike explore YOUmedia an hour before the event has “definitely been successful and caused a bunch of the kids to come back and use our space post-OpenMike.”

If OpenMike has any challenges to overcome, they seem to be go unnoticed by the participants, all of whom, when asked if there is anything they don't like about OpenMike or wish OpenMike did better, all shook their heads no in unison; "It's perfect the way it is," said one teen. In that regard, whatever challenges OpenMike has faced or faces now are largely irrelevant to its outward success, since they seem not to have an impact on teens' perception of the event. Nonetheless, it is important to note that OpenMike doesn't just happen every month; "there is a lot of planning and strategy that goes into it," Jensen says, and "it has certainly created a lot of work for [YOUmedia]."

Adding to the immense amount of planning that OpenMike requires, Thorson explains that a lot of that planning "exists on a week-by-week basis." Due to the celebrity factor (coordinating the schedules of Chance and the guest artists he often brings), SocialWorks often does not confirm the date of each OpenMike until 7-10 days prior. This touches on another challenge: the lack of control that HWLC actually has over the event, which is essentially run by SocialWorks. Thorson says that Chicago Public Library Teen Services "is hopeful for greater integration with the [OpenMike] run-of-show, with an eye for promoting teen programs and services during the event." This last goal is already progressing, as both the researcher and a YOUmedia Visiting Music Studio Mentor were granted time at the end of the event to promote their respective projects.

***Do OpenMike participants' perceptions of the event align with the connected learning framework? Is OpenMike a connected learning experience?***

The discussion above suggests that the challenges OpenMike faces are manageable, in the sense that they are mostly logistical. While there is always room for improvement, YOUmedia and SocialWorks have managed to create something unique: an engaging,

interest-driven series that reaches diverse youth and encourages them to build community, find and develop their passions, and learn new skills along the way that might lead to new opportunities and thinking about the future. In this sense, OpenMike is a connected learning experience.

In the connected learning framework, there are "three crucial contexts for learning": peer-supported, interest-powered and academically oriented (Ito et al., 2013, p. 12). In hearing the participants' descriptions of OpenMike, as well as the librarians' impressions, it is clear that the peer-supported and interest-powered nature of OpenMike has made it possible for a community to develop among attendees and participants, artists, and mentors - a community that Thorson believes is responsible for sustaining OpenMike in the long term. Within this community, OpenMike participants have learned new ways to express their feelings, think creatively, communicate their experiences to their peers, to feel inspired, motivated, and productive. All of these abilities translate to the potential for greater success in school; while OpenMike is not explicitly academically oriented, its connection to YOUmedia may be crucial to strengthening the link between creative thinking and academic learning. As the one- and three-year reports on YOUmedia from the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research conclude, teens are using YOUmedia to learn and improve 21st-century digital media skills (Sebring et al., 2013) and OpenMike seems to be providing an extension of this innovative pedagogical environment.

The core properties of a connected learning experience are production-centered, shared purpose, and openly networked (Ito et al., 2013). The raps, dances, poems, art work, etc. that OpenMike participants showcase, as well as participants' stated desire to

be productive with their crafts, confirm that OpenMike is production-centered. Additionally, reoccurring themes of artistic pursuit, networking, and community building suggest that OpenMike has a shared purpose for many, if not most, of the attendees. And finally, the teens' explanations for how they heard about OpenMike - by word-of-mouth and social media - and what they enjoyed about the OpenMike experience - being able to follow artists on SoundCloud, Instagram, and Snapchat - show that OpenMike is openly networked. That HWLC, YOUmedia, and OpenMike may be inaccessible and/or intimidating to some youth, however, suggests that the OpenMike network could be more open.

The connected learning environment design principles include: everyone can participate, learning happens by doing, challenge is constant, and everything is interconnected (Ito et al., 2013). The peer support at OpenMike contributes to the perception amongst teens that everyone really can participate; as Thorson and several of the focus group participants pointed out, even if a teen is not directly participating in OpenMike by performing, they are still participating by being a part of an active audience. Several of the focus group participants who identify as artists exhibited a learn-by-doing attitude toward art and public performance, stating that seeing other artists perform at OpenMike encouraged them to do the same (at OpenMike or elsewhere) and that the confidence gained from those experiences encouraged further learning, practicing, and risk-taking in regards to their crafts and seeking out more serious showcasing opportunities (such as auditioning for a Youtube series or television show). This learn-by-doing attitude seems to inherently lead to challenge being constant, as expanding creative interests or skills and overcoming fear of failure or embarrassment

both involve a sense of motivation that requires embracing challenges. Finally, both the participants and the librarians interviewed expressed an awareness that everything is interconnected: digital media, technology and the arts, performance and peer support, mentoring and trust, networking and future-thinking, community and altruism. These connections have created a single space that serves multiple purposes, allowing teens to learn about themselves, their peers, their city, and the potential they all have to thrive.

The final component of the connected learning framework is new media, which Ito et al. propound "amplifies opportunities for connected learning by": fostering engagement and self-expression, increasing accessibility to knowledge and learning experiences, expanding social supports for interests, expanding diversity and building capacity (2013, p. 12). Coincidentally, these are the goals that Brother Mike worked towards as a YOUmedia mentor and the goals that OpenMike was then established to pursue (SocialWorks, 2019). This alignment is not so coincidental, though, when you factor in OpenMike's connection to YOUmedia. As a YOUmedia graduate himself, it's likely that Chance saw the connected library space as the perfect partner for his youth empowerment non-profit, with OpenMike as the metaphorical marriage between the two. As a result, OpenMike contains both the connected learning elements taken from YOUmedia and the arts-driven youth empowerment elements taken from SocialWorks.

It is important to identify OpenMike as a connected learning experience because YALSA has identified connecting learning as a crucial component of the paradigm shift in library teen services: "connected learning is the core of library services for and with teens. Connected learning provides a foundation for what teens need and want from libraries. It reaffirms the value of libraries in the lives of teens" (Braun et al., 2014, p.

10). For libraries that have had or are having difficulties adapting their programming to the needs of 21st-century teens, OpenMike can serve as a roadmap, a helpful example of how one library has successfully created a program for diverse youth by leveraging a community partnership and linking connected learning to arts and civic engagement.

***Are the arts a key component of OpenMike? If so, should the arts be incorporated more effectively in library teen services?***

Per the first section of the findings, OpenMike demonstrates how art plays a critical role in the lives of teens; art is not just a component of OpenMike, it is *the* component - the link that connects young artists to each other, to mentors, and to Chicago at large. Daniel Thorson says OpenMike "is a testament to the importance of providing, not only a venue for teens to express their voice, but also an audience to receive it." The opportunity to self-express, develop relationships with peers and mentors, and take risks to find one's voice indicate to Thorson that "arts should be a focus in library spaces, especially for teens."

According to the connected learning framework, "hands-on learning that comes from actively creating, making, producing, experimenting, remixing, decoding, performing, and designing is engaging and resilient. These are activities when learning becomes tied to self-expression and identity, supported in a group context" (Ito et al., 2013, p. 75). While science, technology, engineering and mathematics often involve hands-on learning, as Jensen notes, "without imagination and creativity, we just keep producing the same results over and over. Art encourages reflection, practice, and iteration," which are practices that become helpful, if not necessary, to all disciplines and aspects of life. Indeed, as part of a series of publications on research in the arts conducted

by the RAND corporation, McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks undertook an extensive study on the instrumental and intrinsic benefits of the arts, determining that the arts provide cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral, health, economic, and community-level social benefits that can be both personal and public (2004). As institutions that serve both personal and public functions, libraries, then, should be among the strongest advocates for the arts.

In addition to connected learning, YALSA identifies an expanded definition of literacy as part of the paradigm shift for teen library programming. Per the YALSA Futures report, "literacy is no longer viewed as a mechanical process, but is understood as the construction of meaning" (Braun et al., 2014, p. 4). One way libraries can continue centering literacy in their services while adapting to the expanded definition that has resulted from the shift in who teens are and what they need is to begin centering their services on the arts as well.

***Which aspects of OpenMike identified by participants as important are unique to OpenMike? Which aspects could be used to build a teen services and programming framework for other public libraries?***

With the exception of Chance, what is currently unique to OpenMike is not *inherently* unique to OpenMike. There are many aspects to the series that have contributed to its success and almost all of them can be adopted into a general framework for designing public library services and programming for diverse teens. Students identified the supportive and positive environment of OpenMike, the chance to see and work with other artists, having an adult push them to pursue their interests, and the opportunity to showcase their hard work as the most important element of the series and the reasons

why they attend. While some of what is needed to provide these things in a library program is logistical and/or financial (a performing space, equipment for creating, good marketing), the linchpin is the staff.

In response to a question about what other libraries would need to establish services and programming that attracts and engages diverse youth, the focus group participants, rather than giving a laundry list of items, actually all said the same thing: adults who care. One student said libraries "have the resources, they have the space, so it's up to them to branch out to the young people and not just think that, 'oh, they just on their phones,' or 'they don't wanna be bothered,' or 'they're bad.'" In other words, teens - and perhaps, as Thorson said, Chicago teens in particular - are used to being judged by adults; if a library aims to successfully reach teens, it needs staff that are willing and able to relate to, understand, and really work with young people. As another student pointed out, the adults in the room are in charge and it's their job to communicate: "Because we really don't have to talk to them, it's actually *them* talkin to *us* and getting to know what we like to do and then putting a team together…that's really what they have to do – it's just communication."

One reason that YOUmedia and OpenMike seem to have been so successful with teens is because the adults recognize their role as leaders, mentors, and friends to the teens and they embrace it. Thorson says,

> My biggest takeaway as a teen programmer centers on the importance of modeling encouraging and supportive behavior to empower teens to perform. A successful showcasing program (like an open mic event) relies on a facilitator who is willing to take risks, i.e. perform, and models a type of community-building behavior, one centered on encouraging words and supportive practices.

The value that students place on knowledgeable and devoted adults suggest that, even more so than the actual content of a library teen program, the facilitators of the program may determine its success.

The OpenMike "framework" must also include the willingness of adults to relinquish control. Both Thorson and Jensen believe the complete teen ownership of OpenMike is what makes it most unique. But it's important to note that such ownership goes beyond YOUmedia and the auditorium where OpenMike actually takes place; Thorson describes how this plays out at HWLC:

> The event allows teens to take over a large portion of the library. Usual building functions totally shift during OpenMike, all for the purpose of allowing teens to enter and attend their event. This contributes to a feeling that the event – and the library as a whole – belongs to teens on OpenMike night. While creating ownership for teens in their space is something we always strive for as teen library staff, achieving this often means carving out a small space for teens in the midst of everything else taking place in the library (including policy considerations).

In this way, OpenMike demonstrates the unique needs of quality library teen services: teens are able to thrive when they are given their own space where other patrons and library staff cannot judge or disturb or punish them (like YOUmedia), but at the same time, the full use of that space and its programs might also require spillover, wherein an agreement exists within the library as a whole to continue to respect the separate (and thus, perhaps more disorderly) nature of the teen space, even when it's boundaries temporarily expand (like OpenMike). The relationship between OpenMike and HWLC, then, serves as an example of how a library can, for at least one night a month, show recognition that young patrons matter.

Centering teens also means acknowledging that even a smaller segment of a patron population is not monolithic. “Youth” covers a wide range of ages and one way the Chicago Public Library has strived to meet the varying needs of different age groups is by opening a number of age-specific YOUmedia spaces where middle schoolers and high schoolers can find services and programs tailored to their academics and interests (Chicago Public Library, 2019). As Jensen explains, “If everything is for everybody, it becomes very hard to actually serve underserved populations. So having specific programming both aids with gathering funding and providing for specific groups of people.”

A final ingredient to a public library teen services framework that has proven useful for OpenMike is community partnerships. Jensen says that collaboration with SocialWorks is a “big part of why [OpenMike works!” HWLC provides the space and YOUmedia provides the programming before the event, but SocialWorks “provide[s] a lot of the advertising and pull for the students we don’t normally see.” Thorson agrees that the partnership with SocialWorks “is extremely valuable in creating exposure for the library and establishing the YOUmedia brand,” but for libraries to really benefit from community partnerships, partners must “provide services that are teen-interested and align with library programming models and objectives.” Though librarians can do a lot, they can’t do everything; recognizing the technical, expertise, funding, and space limitations of a library and its staff can lead to productive, mutual partnerships that are beneficial to everyone involved.

# CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

OpenMike succeeds as a library program for diverse teens. Though tracking and following up would be necessary to determine the long-term impact of the series on attendees and participants, this case study demonstrates its impact on teens right now. Over the past three years, OpenMike has nurtured the artistic talent of Chicago's youth, provided a safe and supportive space for young people to develop confidence in themselves and their interests and passions, planted the seeds for and encouraged the growth of creative communities, and inspired teens to actively engage with each other, the library, and the city.

OpenMike is one example of the transformation of library teen services outlined by YALSA's Futures report, and the particular ways in which it was originally conceived and is currently executed have implications for the broader world of public library services and programming for teens, as libraries continue to confront shifting demographics, new media literacies and technology, dwindling budgets, and a growing digital divide (Braun et al., 2014).

## *Implications for Connected Learning and Connected Libraries*

Many connected learning environments, including those that have become popular in libraries, focus on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) (Martin, 2016). While there is obvious value in teaching youth STEM skills, especially as it pertains to career development, this research demonstrates a clear value in providing youth with

opportunities to engage in the arts. Indeed, the idea of STEAM - that is, adding the arts to STEM initiatives - has been gaining traction in the field of education, as educators and business leaders acknowledge that creative thinking improves innovation (Gess, 2017). As parents, teachers, and employers debate the merits of STEM vs. STEAM, though, it's important to note that art for the sake of art is beneficial to teens.

At the same time that art programs continue to be cut from schools nationwide (often as a result of STEM initiatives) (Miller, 2017), inadequate public school funding and a precarious economy combine to create a system of education fixated on numbers - test scores, college admissions, unemployment rates (Strauss, 2018); in other words, the pressure to be academically and financially successful means that there exists fewer and fewer spaces for young people to just hangout, mess around, and geek out over the things that bring them joy, and the things that bring them peace of mind. OpenMike demonstrates why these spaces are crucial for teens: improving literacy through poetry and rap, developing self-confidence through public performance, and booking jobs through connections are undoubtedly positive outcomes, but what OpenMike participants seem to value most is the opportunity to learn and hone a craft that is their own. The focus group participants spoke of OpenMike and the arts as if they are life-saving, both literally - supplanting life on the streets - and figuratively - providing access to emotional outlets, supportive peer communities, and caring relationships with adults.

As one of the only spaces left in American where everyone is welcome (at least in theory) and everything is free (Halpern, 2018; Klinenberg, 2018), libraries are especially well positioned to advocate access to the arts. There is a growing body of critical pedagogy research indicating that the arts, including hip-hop, rap, and spoken word, are

particularly beneficial to non-dominant youth, serving as a vehicle for literacy and education, therapy and healing, and personal exploration and growth (Tyson, 2002; Leard & Lashua, 2006; Weinstein, 2007; Thompson, 2012; Hutzel, Bastos & Cosier, 2012; Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013; Heath, 2014; Pane, 2015; Black, Castro & Lin, 2015) If connected learning is meant to benefit non-dominant youth in similar ways, then making a more explicit link between connected learning and the arts within libraries seems advisable. By marrying YOUmedia and its established connected learning model to the civic engagement- and arts-based SocialWorks, OpenMike has done just that.

### *Implications for Teen Librarianship*

Libraries have a serious diversity problem (Honma, 2005; Bourg, 2014; Branche, 2012; Galvan, 2015; Hathcock, 2015; Vinopal, 2016); according to the 2009-2010 numbers (which are the most recent) of the American Library Association's Diversity Counts, 88% of credentialed librarians and 77% of library assistants in the U.S. are white (American Library Association, 2012). So it was surprising to see at the December 10, 2018 OpenMike the demographics of the teens reflected in the staff; that is, the librarians and library staff in YOUmedia and the volunteers for SocialWorks actually *looked like* the teens in the audience, both racially (Black, Hispanic, White), and aesthetically (tattoos, dreadlocks, piercings, dyed hair). Though the focus group participants did not explicitly state the importance of racial and ethnic representation in role models, they did say that seeing and hearing from artists (both peers and adults) who understand their lived experiences because they've come from the same place, (geographically, economically, etc.) was a significant factor in feeling like they were a part of a community, finding the

confidence to pursue their craft more seriously, and expanding their imagination of what was possible for them, especially creatively.

Indeed, representative mentorship is at the heart of OpenMike, where Chance, Malcolm and SocialWorks and YOUmedia staff work to develop the same nurturing relationships that Brother Mike, a young Black man, built in the early years of YOUmedia. In an interview about OpenMike, co-founder Malcolm London describes the importance of Brother Mike and the example he set for how adults should interact with teens:

> Brother Mike really made that space. To me, he was definitely a father figure. More than anything it was the way he taught young people. He wasn't a teacher, he was a mentor. We were in that space because we wanted to be there. He gave young people autonomy with you lives and our choices and supported us in every way. From teaching us how to use the studio to buying us lunch when we didn't have it, or giving us bus cards to make it home. He supported young people in a way that wasn't heavy-handed, but was about lifting us up. He didn't show us what we could and couldn't do, he showed us how to do it (Whalen, 2015).

Over the past three decades, as libraries have adapted to the Internet and technology by expanding their services and resources, librarians have increasingly taken on the role of teacher/instructor (Baker & Litzinger, 1992; Rader, 1997; Walter, 2008). While this has undoubtedly benefited patrons, OpenMike serves as an important reminder that many teens are in greater need of a mentor than they are of an instructor, especially if they have had negative experiences with teachers in school. As London points out, he and his peers went to YOUmedia because they wanted to be there, and they wanted to be there because Brother Mike was a positive presence. As technological skills become more and more critical to academic and professional success, it is likely that the role of librarians as teachers will only continue to grow; at the same time, it is crucial that libraries prioritize both teen spaces and teen librarians who have the training and disposition to provide

support beyond instruction, as the librarians at YOUmedia clearly do. Not only do mentors serve as emotional support for young patrons, they also serve as role models - physical representations of what young people are capable of if they find a passion and pursue it with determination.

YOUmedia is an example of a teen library space with librarians who bring more than a degree to the job: based on observations at the December 10, 2018 OpenMike, YOUmedia's staff is young and diverse and highly knowledgeable about the things teens are interested in: art, music, virtual reality, gaming. But while YOUmedia has succeeded in hiring a diverse staff that can attend to the needs and interests of a diverse patron base, other libraries struggle to do so, in large part because the requirement of a Master's degree can be a major hindrance to recruiting and retaining employees for non-assistant or paraprofessional positions in libraries. Indeed, the more proportionate representation of library *assistants* in relation to the demographics of the general population suggests that librarianship is not inherently unconducive to diversity, but as library director Keith Curry Lance notes, "the challenge lies...more generally in the lack of diversity among holders of master's degrees - in anything" (2005, p. 41).

Though a larger conversation within the LIS field about the true necessity of obtaining a master's degree to work in libraries needs to be had, OpenMike seems to have found at least one solution to this issue: community partnerships. While YOUmedia helps run OpenMike on the frontend by communicating with the rest of the HWLC about timing, security and other logistics, as well as by providing the YOUmedia space as crowd control, the actual event is spearheaded by SocialWorks staff and volunteers. SocialWorks staff and volunteers, many of whom, if not all of whom, are themselves

artists in some capacity, do not have library degrees. What Socialworks staff and volunteers have is street cred: with connections to many of the neighborhoods from which OpenMike students hail, as well as connections to various Chicago artist communities, SocialWorks has the power to authentically engage students who attend OpenMike and serve as mentors in ways that YOUmedia librarians may be unable to. That this engagement, and the safe, inclusive and creative space it creates at HWLC, can allow students to develop a better sense of trust and comfort with the library as whole is an added benefit of the partnership.

By partnering with SocialWorks, YOUmedia has acknowledged not only that librarians can't do everything, but that they shouldn't; indeed, as the breadth of services provided by public libraries continues to grow, it is critical that librarians recognize, and accept, their financial, expert, and social constraints. Only by acknowledging these constraints can libraries begin utilizing community partnerships to bridge gaps in funding, staffing, and importantly, community representation and thereby, community trust.

Another final implication for librarianship is the relationship between libraries as a whole and their established teen spaces. YOUmedia, much like the teen spaces in other libraries that are lucky enough to have them, is walled off from the rest of the library. As discussed in the findings section, a physical space that exclusively prioritizes the needs of young adults, both in design and programming/resources, is critical to successfully serving this demographic. However, as in the case of OpenMike, sometimes those needs go beyond that individual space. The popularity of OpenMike, and YOUmedia's goal to allow entrance to as many teens as possible, means that the rest of HWLC must make

certain adjustments required by OpenMike. Daniel Thorson says that one of OpenMike's unique elements is "the way in which the event allows teens to take over a large portion of the library." Rather than forcing teens to adhere to the rules outside the walls of YOUmedia, HWLC lets OpenMike take precedence for one night per month. Teens do not fit the mold of the "ideal" library patron: they are often loud, restless, and uninterested in following rules. However, they are also curious, passionate, and open to exploration, and thus, in many ways, actually are the ideal patron. If libraries hope to meet the needs of these patrons in the 21st-century, they must make certain policy and spatial considerations for how teens interact with the people and spaces around them.

The final implication for librarianship is creating atmospheres in addition to physical spaces. All of the focus group participants spoke about the uplifting environment at OpenMike. That the atmosphere at OpenMike is so non-judgmental is not incidental; when Chicago-based journalist Tara Mahadevan attended an OpenMike in 2016 she describes Chance starting the event with a call-and-response borrowed from Brother Mike Hawkins, in which Chance says "Power to the people!" and, "with raised fists in the air, the teens respond with fervor, 'And the people would say right on!'" This mantra of empowerment is followed by a reminder that "no racist, sexist, homophobic, gender-biased, ableist, ageist, or transphobic language allowed. Respect the mic, respect the time, respect the space" (Mahadevan, 2016). These are weighty words and it was clear at the December 10, 2018 OpenMike, when both mantras were repeated more than once by the emcees and the audience, that they are taken seriously.

"Power to the people" is a phrase infused with history, but used in the context of OpenMike, it is also a call to action for the future, a reminder that people, and

significantly in this case, *teens* have power, that they can change the world. While it's likely that few of the students who attend OpenMike ever knew Brother Mike, they do know Chance, and more importantly, they respect Chance and the vision he has for the OpenMike community. By turning social justice concepts into mantras, Chance and SocialWorks leaders essentially created community guidelines for OpenMike. These rules are not written or posted anywhere, lest students feel like they are back in class, tempted to rebel against anything codified; instead, they are spoken, collectively, so as to create community accountability without singling anyone out individually. Teen librarians wanting to create or improve their teen services and programming, especially in regards to attracting and serving non-dominant teens, should focus on intentional design, not just of the physical space but of the *aura* of that space and how teens will feel once they're inside.

### *Implications for LIS Education*

Implications for connected learning and librarianship necessarily have implications for LIS education, as LIS students are the future librarians who will be tasked with carrying out the changes in the landscape of teen services. In its Futures report, YALSA lists several core values that "serve as a compass for actions and describe how the profession views, interacts with, and serves teens through libraries" (Braun, 2014, p. 19-20). They are: connected learning, literacy, education, adaptability, respect, collaboration, diversity, inclusivity, equality, and intellectual freedom. One way in which LIS educations can instill these values in future teen librarians is by teaching through a framework of equity, which can include supplementing traditional LIS theory with critical race theory and critical librarianship.

Reference and instruction librarian Kenny Garcia defines critical librarianship as "a critical theorist framework that is epistemological, self-reflective, and activist in nature." It "seeks to be transformative, empowering, and a direct challenge to power and privilege" (2015). As Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale point out in *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, "reflective, progressive, and theoretically informed practice has a lengthy, though not always straightforward, history within LIS" (2018, p. 2). Thus, while the concept of critical librarianship may not be new, since the advent of #critlib critical librarianship as an explicit theoretical framework has become a quickly growing body of scholarship within academic librarianship. As a focus of scholarship, though, critical librarianship has remained in the upper echelons of academia, yet to make its way into the classroom as a framework for critical pedagogy for *library students*.

While LIS scholars and professionals, then, may benefit from such inward thinking and practice, many LIS students have not been given the opportunity to challenge the beliefs and practices of their chosen field. If LIS students are to successfully center their professional work within a framework of equity, they must learn to think from a critical lens. Students at the University of Illinois iSchool can take Dr. Nicole Cooke's "Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Information Professions;" students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Information and Library Science can take Dr. Sandra Hughes-Hassell's "Information Services in a Diverse Society" or Dr. Amelia Gibon's "Disability Informatics and Information;" and students at the University of Washington iSchool can take Dr. Karen's Fisher "Information Beyond Borders," or Dr. Clarita Lefthand-Begay's "Native American Knowledge Systems:

Sovereign Rights, Protections and Protocols" (Illinois School of Information Sciences, 2019; UNC School of Library and Information Science, 2019; UW Information School, 2019). Library and information graduate programs have begun offering courses with critical perspectives, but these courses, many of which are irregularly offered special topics courses, account for only one or two courses in an entire catalog. For students with the schedule flexibility to take electives, these courses are a great start, but ideally, critical theory should underlie all LIS courses because LIS is a *service* field; LIS professionals cannot adequately serve their patrons or clients if they do not understand who their patrons and clients are, as well as how their institution impacts their patrons and clients, both on an individual and a community level.

What makes OpenMike unique is its intentionality: the collaboration between SocialWorks and YOUmedia, its central location at HWLC, its inclusive environment. Intentionality, though, requires self-reflection and self-critique, an ability to challenge the status quo and confront institutionalized and systemic issues. This is especially pertinent in an overwhelmingly white profession serving a teen demographic that is becoming increasingly non-white (Braun, 2014). If programs like OpenMike are to become the norm, the values and skills required to meet the paradigm shift for libraries and teen services must begin with educating future professionals.

### *Conclusion*

By all accounts, OpenMike is a success story. It paints a picture, perhaps not of the current landscape of teen services, but of what the future landscape of teen services and programming should, and could, look like. Through intentional design and a supportive and inclusive environment, community partnerships, mentoring, and a focus on the arts

and *teen ownership*, OpenMike has managed to engage an incredibly diverse group of high school students for three years and counting. OpenMike has done what many library teen programs strive to do: it has brought young people into the library, encouraged them to be passionate about something and nurtured that passion, created a community that keeps them coming back, and inspired them to enjoy the present and dream about the future. The question now is how can a program like OpenMike become the norm? What is required of libraries and their staff, governments and schools, to ensure that society not only sees the potential in young people, but also responds to it by providing free and accessible services and resources? This case study provides a brief blueprint of just some of the ingredients needed to create a successful library program for diverse teens, and serves as a strong indication that libraries can, and should, play a pivotal role empowering teens.

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# NOTES

[1]Subramaniam borrows the term "non-dominant" from Ito et al.'s *Connected Learning Agenda for Research and Design* as a descriptor that "explicitly calls attention to issues of power and power relations" in a way that more traditional terms such as minority and diverse do not (2013, p. 7).

# APPENDIX

## *Appendix I: Focus Group Guide and Consent Form*

**University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**
**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**
**Focus Group for Adult Participants**

**Consent Form Version Date:** November 20, 2018
**IRB Study #** 18-2655
**Title of Study**: OpenMike: A Library Teen Services Case Study
**Principal Investigator**: Meg Foster
**Principal Investigator Department**: School of Information and Library Science
**Principal Investigator Phone number**: (919) 962-8027
**Principal Investigator Email Address**: mafoster@live.unc.edu
**Faculty Advisor**: Sandra Hughes-Hassell
**Faculty Advisor Contact Information**: (919) 667-5483

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**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**
You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

**What is the purpose of this study?**
The purpose of this research study is to determine how OpenMike has been beneficial to you, as a participant or attendee (or, alternatively, how it has not been beneficial to you, if that is the case). The aim of the study is to identify specific aspects of a youth library program that have made it successful, so that those aspects may be applied elsewhere, in other programs at other libraries seeking to improve their youth services.

You are being asked to be in the study because you have attended OpenMike, participated as a performer in OpenMike, or both.

**Are there any reasons you should not be in this study?**
You should not be in this study if you have not attended or participated in OpenMike and if you are not at least 18 years of age.

**How many people will take part in this study?**
A total of approximately 25 people at number institutions will take part in this study, including approximately one person from this institution.

**How long will your part in this study last?**
Your participation in this focus group will last approximately one hour.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**
The group will be asked to speak about experiences at OpenMike, the YOUmedia lab, and the Chicago Public Library in general. No questions will be directed to you individually, but instead will be posed to the group. You may choose to respond or not respond at any point during the discussion. The focus group discussion will be audiotaped so we can capture comments in a transcript for analysis.

**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**
Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. There is little chance you will benefit from being in this research study.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**
We do not anticipate any risks or discomfort to you from being in this study. Even though we will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future. Therefore, we encourage you to be as honest and open as you can, but remain aware of our limits in protecting confidentiality.

**How will information about you be protected?**
Every effort will be taken to protect your identity as a participant in this study. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study or its results. Your name will not appear on any transcripts; instead, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym (a fake name) to use during the focus group. The list that matches real names and pseudonyms will be kept in a locked file cabinet. After the focus group tape has been transcribed, the tape will be destroyed, and the list of names and pseudonyms will also be destroyed.

**What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?**
You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had

an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

**Will you receive anything for being in this study?**
You will be receiving a $20 gift card for taking part in this study, as well as a $25 Uber ride and food. In the event that you withdraw from the study, you will not the $20 gift card.

**Will it cost you anything to be in this study?**
It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

**What if you have questions about this study?**
You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions about the study (including payments), complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

**Participant's Agreement**:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

_____ _____
Signature of Research Participant Date

_____
Printed Name of Research Participant

_____ _____
Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent Date

_____

Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent

Focus Group Guide

Thank you all for spending some extra time here to participate in my study. My name is Meg Foster and I'm a graduate student in library science. I just hit the record button so that I can focus on our discussion, rather than on taking notes, and make sure I don't miss anything that's said. I'm here today to talk about your experiences with OpenMike, specifically, and the YOUmedia lab and Chicago Public Library more broadly. I want to know what specific aspects about OpenMike made you go and why it's such a popular event with teens. Some of you have attended, maybe some of you have even performed, some of you have used the YOUmedia lab and know some of the YOUmedia and Social Worlds staff that help put the event together, some of you may have come alone, while other attended with friends – these are the kinds of things I want to hear about; so please, feel free to share anything related to the topic; there are no right or wrong answers.

I'm going to be asking questions to the whole group, but anyone can respond; there's no need to raise your hand, but if several of you have something to say, I will call on you individually. In order to keep your responses confidential, I've asked you to choose a pseudonym to write on a nametag – these are the names I'll be calling you and I ask that you all please refer to each other by the names written on the nametags. Please help to keep what's said in this discussion confidential by not repeating anything that's said outside of this group. If we start to get off topic, I will try to bring us back to OpenMike. Does anyone have any questions or concerns? Okay, let's get started. Can we go around and say our names (your pseudonyms) and how many times we've been to OpenMike?

1. Had any of you been to a YOUmedia lab or Chicago Public Library branch prior to attending an OpenMike event, if so, what were you there for?
2. Tell me how you initially heard about OpenMike and what prompted you to come? If you've been more than once, why did you come back?
3. Tell me about your experience with OpenMike – how did you feel? (Excited? Empowered? Inspired?) If any of you have performed at OpenMike, please feel free to share that experience.
4. What's your favorite part about OpenMike? (The performances? The socializing? Chance?)
5. Did attending an OpenMike encourage any of you to go back to the library for a different purpose, like to attend another program or use the YOUmedia lab?
6. Are there things about OpenMike that you wish you saw in other library or school programs? In other words, do you wish there were more events like OpenMike? Why, and what would those look like?
7. Has OpenMike sparked your interest in the performing arts, digital media, or creative or activist communities?

8. Do you feel supported by the adults involved with OpenMike?
9. Is there anything you don't like about OpenMike?

***Appendix II: Librarian Questionnaire and Consent Form***

You are invited to participate in a study that will gather information about the Chicago Public Library and SocialWorks event, OpenMike. The study is being conducted by Meg Foster, a graduate student in the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. Results of this study will be used in Meg Foster's master's paper for the completion of her master's degree in Information Science. Meg Foster can be reached by email at mafoster@live.unc.edu. This project is being supervised by her faculty advisor, Dr. Sandra Hughes-Hassell, a faculty member in the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. She can be reached by email at smhughes@email.unc.edu.

Participation in this study is voluntary and should take around 1-2 hours. Participation will involve responding to approximately 15 interview questions about the design of and intention behind OpenMike, any challenges that are preventing OpenMike from reaching maximal success, and the perceived benefits of OpenMike to its participants and attendees. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, However, you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interview at any time. We respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your responses to the questionnaire will be identified by your personal name and/or official title at the Chicago Public Library unless you prefer to remain anonymous, in which case, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym. Your response will appear in Meg Foster's completed master's paper, in any of its published forms, any subsequent publications resulting from the study and/or master's paper.

A copy of this agreement will be given to you for your records. Please sign and return this consent form to Meg Foster in-person or at mafoster@live.unc.edu if you wish to participate in an interview. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher for clarification.

Please read the following statement and sign at the bottom of this form if you wish to participate.

*I have read and understand the foregoing descriptions of the study. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I will receive a copy of this consent form. This study has been approved by the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill IRB and Office of Human Research Ethics.*

Printed name: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions

This study is for the School of Information and Library Science and is seeking to understand how OpenMike is beneficial to its participants and why it's been such a success. I've held a focus group to hear directly from the teens who attend OpenMike, but obtaining the perspectives of some of the adults involved, either directly or indirectly, with OpenMike and the teens who attend, could provide a valuable basis for comparison. If you want the information to be confidential, I can assign a pseudonym and not disclose your job title. Otherwise, I will use your name and job title. The information from this questionnaire will be used in a master's paper about successful library programming for diverse teens.

1. Tell me about your role at the Chicago Public Library and whether you're involved in OpenMike or interact with some of the teens who attend or participate in OpenMike?
2. What do you think qualifies a library program or service as successful and do you think OpenMike has been successful?
3. Have you heard from teens about their experiences with OpenMike? What is your perceived value of the event for those teens?
4. What makes OpenMike unique? What makes it stand out among other library programs?
5. How does the attendance and the diversity of the attendance of OpenMike compare to other CPL events?
6. Can you tell be about the collaborative aspects of OpenMike? How do CPL and SocialWorks divide work and define their roles? How important is this partnership to the event and do you think other library programs could benefit from community partnerships?
7. I realize that Chance and some of the artists he brings out every month are probably a huge draw for teens – do you think OpenMike would be viable without those big names? In other words, how much of the draw for teens is Chance, and how much do other things, like performing, socializing, etc., factor in?
8. Has OpenMike changed at all since its inception? Was it created with an intentional design and mission?
9. Based on social media marketing I've seen, it seems like OpenMike is very intentionally centered on youth and sort of makes it clear that the power is with youth and not adults – why is that? How does play out?
10. How closely related to YOUmedia is OpenMike? Do many teens who go to or perform at OpenMike use the YOUmedia lab or has OpenMike just evolved into a totally separate entity?
11. I'm really curious about the performance aspect of OpenMike, since that's just not something you see in a lot of library programs. Do you think that's something that draws teens in and keeps them coming? Do you think it has an impact beyond the library, in

terms of building teens' confidence to pursue hobbies or share their stories? Does this suggest that libraries should make more room for the arts?
12. Three years is a long time for a single program. And I know in the beginning, OpenMike changed locations and wasn't always held at the library, but Chance said he wanted to bring it back home to CPL – so what sustains OpenMike?
13. What have you learned from OpenMike as a librarian?
14. OpenMike, like a lot of things that Chance does, seems really Chicago-focused – what's the importance of that?
15. How has OpenMike impacted Harold Washington or CPL as a whole? Has it impacted teen services and programming?
16. What is CPL's end goal with OpenMike? Will it remain as it is, are there plans for expansion or other changes?

## *Appendix III: UNC IRB Approval*

THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA at CHAPEL HILL

**OFFICE OF HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS**
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Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #4801

**To**: Meg Foster, Sandra Hughes-Hassell
School of Information and Library Science

**From**: Office of Human Research Ethics

**Date**: 11/20/2018
**RE**: Notice of IRB Exemption
**Exemption Category**: 2.Survey, interview, public observation
**Study #:** 18-2655

**Study Title**: OpenMike: A Library Teen Services Case Study

This submission has been reviewed by the Office of Human Research Ethics and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

**Study Description:**

Purpose: The purpose of this case study is to investigate how OpenMike, a monthly collaborative library program for Chicago high school students, is beneficial for its participants and if there are any challenges it still needs to overcome for maximal success and impact. With changing demographics of teens in the U.S., reduced library budgets, and new 21st century skills needed to be successful both in school and the work force, libraries must rethink their services in order to meet the needs of these diverse youth. Determining why OpenMike has become so popular among Chicago youth will help inform ongoing research about what libraries and librarians need to provide effective teen services to all teens, but especially marginalized teens.

Participants: Chicago high school students who have participated in or attended an OpenMike session, Chicago Public Library staff members with direct knowledge of OpenMike, and SocialWorks staff members with direct knowledge of OpenMike.

Procedures (methods): 1-2 focus groups will be conducted at the Chicago Public Library with 5-10 teens who are at least 18-years-old (10 teens total). Semi-structured interviews will be conducted at the Chicago Public Library and SocialWorks office with staff members and will last 60-120 minutes.

**Investigator's Responsibilities:**

If your study protocol changes in such a way that exempt status would no longer apply, you should contact the above IRB before making the changes. There is no need to inform the IRB about changes

in study personnel. However, be aware that you are responsible for ensuring that all members of the research team who interact with subjects or their identifiable data complete the required human subjects training, typically completing the relevant CITI modules.

The IRB will maintain records for this study for 3 years, at which time you will be contacted about the status of the study.

The current data security level determination is Level II. Any changes in the data security level need to be discussed with the relevant IT official. If data security level II and III, consult with your IT official to develop a data security plan. Data security is ultimately the responsibility of the Principal Investigator.

Please be aware that approval may still be required from other relevant authorities or "gatekeepers" (e.g., school principals, facility directors, custodians of records), even though the project has determined to be exempt. .